

Come on down!!!

A closer look at invitations and altar calls

It would be impossible to give an accurate description of the modern evangelical church without mention of the invitation system or the “altar call,” as it is called. It is customary in virtually all Evangelical, Fundamentalist, Wesleyan, Pentecostal, and Charismatic circles. Immediately following the sermon the congregation will sing a hymn during which the preacher calls men and women to walk to the front of the auditorium (to the altar) to make a public decision to accept Christ. Salvation is offered to all who will come up front and take it. The altar call is universal in the evangelical world and is considered to be an essential part of evangelism.

Should we invite or plead with people to come to Christ?

First, it must be noted that Scriptures abound with invitations to salvation. Such offers as “Come to me,” and “Come to me and drink,” and “be reconciled to God” are well known; and they deserve to be. Paul described the gospel messengers’ task in 2 Corinthians 5:20, “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” The apostles did not hesitate to hold out Christ as Savior to all who would listen. “Repent therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out (Acts 3:19). They preached indiscriminately, “Be reconciled to God” and testified, “to both the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21).

There should be urgency in the way the gospel is preached. Preachers of the gospel should be beseeching, urging, pleading for people to come to Christ. There is both an invitation and an appeal. It is our responsibility and privilege to press on our loved ones and friends the awful urgency of this matter. They must trust Christ or they will perish! And so we may confidently tell them with the authority of Christ and “command” them to believe. There should be a pressing urgency to offer salvation to all. Paul gave an appeal to the mind in 2 Corinthians 5:11, “We persuade men;” and he made an appeal to the heart and emotions, “knowing the terror of the Lord.” He also made an appeal to the conscience, “I hope that we are made manifest also in your consciences.” So it is clear that the Apostles gave invitations to all who would hear, appealing to their intellects, emotions, and their wills. Any gospel message that does not earnestly entreat people to surrender and come to Christ is not a legitimate gospel offer.

But all this says nothing about the use of altar calls. The altar call is for men and women to physically move from one point to another. The gospel call is for a man to spiritually identify with Christ through faith, to reach out with the hand of faith and lay hold of Him Who is life. However, this must never be confused with a command to move anywhere physically. Neither Jesus nor His apostles ever instructed anyone that in order to be saved they must come to the front or come for prayer or go to any geographical location. They need to do no such thing. They were exhorted to go to Christ and nowhere else.

Was the altar call practiced in the past?

It is often shocking to many that the use of the modern altar call is a recent custom. The practice, although widespread, is a very new phenomenon in the Christian church. For nearly nineteen centuries no one had ever heard of the practice. Such well-known evangelists as George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and even John Wesley never heard of such a custom. In fact, there were no altar calls in the first great awakening. And Charles Spurgeon, that passionate winner of souls, although well acquainted with the practice, firmly refused to adopt it and even criticized it severely. He refused to direct anyone to an altar or to the front of a building. He directed them only to Christ. “Go to your God at once, even where you are now!” he would insist. “Cast yourself on Christ, now, at

once, ere you stir an inch!” Spurgeon’s practice modeled the Bible exactly. He allowed nothing to confuse the direction in which the sinner should turn. His attention must be directed to Christ and Christ alone.

Ironically, the old-fashioned altar call was unheard of until the mid nineteenth century. It first came into popularity by the influence of Charles Finney, the pioneer of modern evangelistic methods. In Finney’s crusades, around 1830 seats at the front were reserved for those who, after the sermon, would respond to the challenge to come to the Lord’s side. Those who were thus anxious for their souls were invited to walk forward to the “anxious seat” where counsel and prayer would be given. The following quote from Finney’s Lectures on Revival explains his view well: “Preach to him, and at the moment he thinks he is willing to do something . . . bring him to the test; call on him to do one thing, to make one step that shall identify him with the people of God. If you say to him, ‘there is the anxious seat, come out and avow your determination to be on the Lord’s side,’ and if he is not willing to do a small thing as that, then he is not willing to do anything for Christ.”

Most important Jesus never used altar calls. In fact in John chapter 6 is the record of how Christ’s public preaching became a kind of anti-altar call. He sent multitudes away. In verse 67 He said to His disciples, “You do not want to go away also, do you?” Jesus obviously did not have the notion that the power of the gospel might be lost on people if some manipulative technique was not used to try to bring them forward at the close of an evangelistic effort. When we do see an outpouring of response to a public message, for example in Acts at Pentecost, or even in more private settings such as the Philippian jailor, it is always the repentant sinners themselves that initiated the response--not the evangelist. Or more specifically, it is God Himself who worked in their hearts to provoke a response of repentant faith. It was God, not any manipulative technique on Paul’s part, Who opened the heart of Lydia so that she attended to the truths spoken by Paul.

Are there any dangers in the practice of altar calls?

Altar calls are not only unnecessary, but also dangerous, because they distort the fundamental truths of the gospel. There are at least six problems with using this method to bring sinners to repentant faith.

1. It confuses the meaning of faith.

Luther used the terminology “closing with Christ,” which is exactly Biblical. We are to look to Christ and Christ alone. We are to run to Him for refuge, and receive Him. We are told to turn our hearts to Christ, not some physical movement down an aisle. Why should we confuse the issue and ask men to come “here” for Christ? Where do we find biblical justification for such a thing?

What about those who have been saved as a result of an altar call? We must remember that no one is ever saved as a result of an altar call. We must keep in mind that those who are genuinely saved, are saved by the power of the gospel and not because of some technique the evangelist employs. Romans 1:16 states, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” 1 Corinthians 1:18 also affirms this, “For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” According to 1 Corinthians 1:21 it is “the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe” and not the altar call that brings salvation. It is the gospel alone that saves.

2. It confuses the scriptural requirement for public professions.

It is true that Scripture plainly requires public profession of faith. Jesus told His hearers in Matthew 10:32-33, “Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father

who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven.” These are important words and speak well to a glaring weakness in the Christian church today. Far too many believe that they can enter heaven without any fruit in their lives. There are demands. Faith must be evident. Saving faith is a pledge of allegiance to Christ. This pledge is visibly and publicly demonstrated in water baptism and in all of life. This says nothing about the altar call. The difference between these methods of public profession is that the altar call demands obedience before salvation is granted, where baptism (as a profession of faith--not as a means to salvation) demands obedience after salvation. There is a world of difference.

3. It fosters mistrust in the power of the Holy Spirit and the preached Word.

God has made it clear that He saves by means of His preached Word. Paul expounded at some length in 1 Corinthians 1, “Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel” (v.17). “For the message of the cross . . . is the power of God” (v. 18). “It pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe” (v. 21). This message which we preach “is the power of God” in saving sinners (vv. 23-24); it is the instrument He uses in bringing men and women to Himself.

4. It confuses the role of the preacher.

The preacher’s duty is not to get decisions, but to proclaim the good news and exhort men and woman to go to Christ. We preach, and God Himself uses the word preached to get the decision. That is all, and that is enough. God is able to do everything else.

5. It confuses the profession of faith with genuine saving faith.

Saving faith is not a decision that is made by adhering to a certain formula. Even if the formula is recited in prayer, this is not saving faith. This is dangerous indeed. Can a man really be saved by answering “yes” to a series of questions? Have we done them any favor by allowing them to think so? This is a misunderstanding of saving faith. It is a confusion of professed faith with true saving faith.

Careful students of evangelism have noticed that where the necessity of public action as a part of conversion has been most emphasized, there has been a corresponding increase in the God-dishonoring record of so-called backsliding, and this is natural. It is also shameful and harmful because we have convinced unconverted people that they are safe. We must never mistake mere professions of faith with true, saving faith.

6. It creates false assurance.

We must admit that the modern altar call has become a kind of third sacrament. We all know many who believe they are Christians because they were baptized as infants. The same is true of countless people who have “walked an aisle” or “come forward” or “repeated a prayer.” Charles Spurgeon addressing the sinner would say, “Go home alone, trusting in Jesus.” Then he would enter dialogue with the sinner, “I would like to go into the inquiry-room. I dare say you would, but we are not willing to pander to popular superstition. We fear that in those rooms we are warmed into fictitious confidence. Very few of the supposed converts of inquiry-rooms turn out well. Go to your God at once, even where you are now. Cast yourself on Christ, now, ere you stir an inch!”

7. It assumes a false view of human ability.

This question is crucial, for it conveys one’s belief about human depravity. It begs the question, “Can man achieve his own salvation prior to God awakening the heart?” To say “yes” conveys the idea that man can do something to gain God’s favor. “The carnal mind is enmity against God and is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can it be. So then, they that are in the flesh cannot

please God” (Romans 8:7-8). Any man dead in sin must be brought to life by God before he can do anything at all that is of spiritual good (Ephesians 2:1-5). These who believe unto salvation first were born of God (John 1:12-13). Salvation comes entirely from God’s side; it is freely at His own will and mercy (Romans 9:16; James 1:18). Salvation cannot in any way be caused by anything a man does prior to regeneration. Salvation is a work of God alone (Jonah 2:9). What men need is rescue, and that rescue only God can give.

The concept of “coming forward” to receive salvation claims to make man capable of something he is not. Any effort prior to the regenerating work of God places the emphasis on man’s ability to effect his own conversion. If one is saved during an altar call, he must be saved prior to walking down the aisle. If he is to be saved there must be no feelings of self-reliance remaining. He must be stripped of any feelings of self-help and must turn in desperation away from himself to Christ.

It is important to observe that the practice of altar calls was not born in the apostolic church. It is not found in the ministry of Jesus, His apostles, or even the church of the post-apostolic period. We saw Jesus and the apostles inviting men and women to Christ to be saved--but never by means of a particular method. Invitations they gave--but not altar calls. If neither Jesus nor His apostles employed this method, if they never commanded such to be done by the church, then it cannot be wrong to decide against this modern method. It is not a question of biblical necessity, but of modern custom and convenience.